



TITLE:

# RHETORIC IN CONFLICT-RELATED YORUBA PROVERBS: GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

AUTHOR(S):

ADEGOJU, Adeyemi

---

CITATION:

ADEGOJU, Adeyemi. RHETORIC IN CONFLICT-RELATED YORUBA PROVERBS: GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA. African Study Monographs 2009, 30(2): 55-69

ISSUE DATE:

2009-06

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/79541>

RIGHT:

## RHETORIC IN CONFLICT-RELATED YORUBA PROVERBS: GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

Adeyemi ADEGOJU

*Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University*

**ABSTRACT** Africa has been a continent enmeshed in violent conflicts. This paper explores the possible place of Yoruba proverbs in the resolution of social conflicts. Drawing on proverbs that touch on conflict and strategies of conflict resolution, it demonstrates that the wisdom of the proverbs does not consist only in the cultural values they carry but also in the underlying rhetorical strokes that give pragmatic force to their interpretation in the context of use. To this end, the paper analyzes and discusses the linguistic-cum-rhetorical devices that underscore the wittiness and persuasive effectiveness of the proverbs toward understanding conflict situations and devising strategies for resolving them.

**Key Words:** Conflict; Conflict resolution; Rhetoric; Yoruba proverbs; Communication.

### INTRODUCTION

Were it not for the strong sense of attachment to one's cultural roots, the persistence and escalation of conflicts in Africa would tempt Africans to denounce David Diop's memorable poetic line "Africa my Africa" by substituting the first person possessive pronoun, "my," with the third person possessive, "their." For in these modern times, "Africa," according to Osaghae & Robinson (2005: 5), "has the uncanny reputation of being the world's leading theater of conflict, war, poverty, disease and instability." Of all these social challenges, conflict, I must admit, is the pivot around which the other undesirable situations revolve. For instance, the effects of conflict on HIV/AIDS, poverty and food security have been emphasized (cf. the United States Institute of Peace, 2001; Draman, 2003; Machel, 2004).

In assessing the spate of conflicts in Africa towards the end of the last millennium, the United States Institute of Peace Special Report of 2001 indicated that the decade of the 1990s witnessed a steady climb in violence across sub-Saharan Africa, with the number of states at war or with significant lethal conflicts doubling from 11 in 1989 to 22 in 2000. Also, Marshall (2005: 3) reported that over forty percent of the region's countries were experiencing wars in the peak year for warfare in Africa in 1993. Providing reference points of the turbulence in the African continent, Osaghae & Robinson (2005) called attention to the notorious genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, and to some extent Burundi, not forgetting the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and Somalia. They also cited the minority uprisings in Nigeria, and the separatist agitation in Cameroon

and Senegal.

While some scholars have been particularly interested in explaining the deterioration of the conflict situation in Africa, others have focused on the management of conflict. Appraising these research areas, Osaghae & Robinson (2005: 6) observed, "Yet, although we now know a lot about the 'causes' and nature of conflicts, they remain intractable and difficult to predict and to deal with." Consequently, that singular issue which has recurrently posed serious challenge to scholars has been the management of conflict in Africa. International organizations such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have attempted to restore peace. So have individual countries, such as the United States and France and even private agencies such as the International Negotiation Network (INN) of the Carter Center of Emory University. Despite such efforts, it has been observed that there are severe shortcomings in the conflict management processes. Bemoaning this situation, Zartman (2000: 3) wrote:

Yet African countries remain impervious to these attentions. Though they involve the activities of seasoned peace makers using the best of personal skills and recently developed knowledge about ways of managing and resolving conflicts, international efforts at conflict management have not been particularly effective or efficient in overcoming the disasters that have brought them to the continent.

It is this futility of efforts to resolve conflicts in African countries that has partly provoked "the search for more creative and contextual approaches to conflict resolution in Africa" (Osaghae, 2000: 201). In fact, Zartman (2000) held the view that before conflicts in Africa rose to an intensity that justified international attention, domestic measures would be expected to come into play. This is the current thinking among scholars who strongly argue for great emphasis to be placed on the wisdom of African traditional conflict management practices. Thus, Brock-Utne (2001: 1), citing Ofuho (1999), lamented the treatment of conflict in Africa through conventional mechanisms to the neglect of traditional approaches.

It is in tandem with this viewpoint that I try to explore in this paper how the wisdom of Yoruba proverbs could be brought to bear on the conflict management practice in Africa. It is relevant to note here that the capability of the proverbs to function in this capacity is tied to their prescriptive function espoused by Olatunji (1984: 175):

The proverbs, more than any other poetic type, outline a rule of conduct. They state what should or should not be done and lay conditions for certain actions and attitudes. They serve as social charters condemning some practices while recommending others. These statements can be negative, positive or conditional. The negative statements usually assert what things are not or should not be done.

They often embody a moral or practical precept or a rule of conduct.

Therefore, in pursuance of the objective set above, I will analyze and discuss the characteristic sentence forms and tropes which reinforce the content and meaning of the proverbs and their potential for guiding constructive conflict resolution practices in Africa.

Following this introductory section is the conceptual/theoretical perspective for this study. It is from there that I will present the main part of this study to analyze and discuss proverbs that bear on conflict situations and resolution. In the last section I give the summary of the findings and conclusion.

### I. Conceptual/Theoretical Perspective

Ssetuba (2002: 1) quoted by Hussein (2005: 61) posited that, "The proverb is regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of a custodian of a people's wisdom and philosophy of life." It is established in the literature that a single proverb can have divergent meanings and be used under varied circumstances, that is, they have times and contexts of application. Be that as it may, Monye (1990), cited in Oha (1998: 90), noted that:

When people use proverbs there is always some relationship between two situations being compared: the proverb statement and its referent in the social context. It is this concatenateness between the human experience and another which gives proverbs their relevance.

Therefore, Oha (1998) argued that there is an analogical function, which is basically cognitive, in the use of proverbs. This analogical reasoning in verbal communication is what Chilton (1988) referred to as "metaphormorphism" (Oha, 1998: 90). This "morphism," according to Oha (1998), requires seeing one thing in terms of another, or the marking of one script (the known) on to another (the unknown) so as to make the latter known.

It is in this light that I invite attention to the connections between the selected Yoruba proverbs and the resolution of conflict in Africa. Realistic conflict resolution in Africa would do well to draw on the wisdom of proverbs whose probing capacity could untangle the underlying causes, patterns, trends and possible resolution strategies. It, therefore, follows that mediators in conflict situations would be more effective by being well grounded in proverbs, for a Yoruba proverb says, "Amòràn-mo-òwe ní í làjà òràn" (It is the informed proverb-adept who settles problems). Invariably, the informed proverb-adept is perforce a rhetorician, because rhetoricians hold the view that any proposition can be expressed in a variety of ways but one of these will be the most effective in swaying an audience on a given occasion. Thus, McQuarrie and Mick (1996: 1) posited, "The central concern of rhetoric has always been method and manner: how to discover the most effective way to express a thought in a given situa-

tion, and then how to alter its expression to suit different situations.”

In view of this, I argue that applying proverbs to solving knotty social problems, especially conflicts, is most desirable. Because proverbs are short, witty, ironic and metaphorical in their formulation, they are often more employed as a rhetorical device to increase the clarity and pragmatic effect of the speaker's communicative intention. In the words of Agbaje (2005: 50), they are “an agent of vitality in the realm of verbal discourse.” They are used to communicate truths that may be abstract and difficult to grasp, as they usually dramatize and configure the bare truths in the facts of everyday life. Through this, such truths become so substantial that they stimulate imagination and challenge our understanding of situations.

To provide a theoretical framework for the study, I adopted the socio-semiotic approach to discourse studies as espoused by Renkema (2004). Renkema (2004: 46) explained, “The central aim in this approach is: Every [piece of] discourse has to be studied in its social context, in the culture and situation in which it appears.” The three concepts that make it possible to interpret the social context of a discourse, according to Halliday & Hasan (1985), are the field, tenor, and mode of discourse.

The field of discourse refers to what is happening and the nature of the social action that is taking place. More specifically, it answers questions about what the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as an essential component. In relation to the present study, the field of discourse is a social conflict in which proverbs are seen as a veritable rhetorical mode of conflict resolution. The tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants relative to their statuses and roles. The analysis and discussion I carry out in the present study concern parties in conflicts and the mediators who seek realistic means of resolving them. Finally, the mode of discourse refers to what part the language plays and the participants' expectations about what language can do for them in that situation. In light of the present study, the mode of language I chose as suitable for meeting the social need of conflict resolution is the proverbial discourse. In particular, what the proverbs can achieve is seen in terms of their prescriptive, persuasive, and didactic essences which are pivotal to resolving conflict.

## II. Analysis and Discussion

Using the probing and prescriptive functions of proverbs, I now proceed to analyzing and discussing some Yoruba proverbs that touch on conflict situations and conflict resolution strategies, categorizing the proverbs under the different issues germane to conflict management and/or resolution. In carrying out the analysis and discussion, I pay attention to the characteristic sentence forms and dominant images in the proverbs.

### 1. Proverbs on the Inevitability of Conflict as a Social Process

If conflict is perceived as a normal social process, seeking to resolve it then should be seen as a means towards achieving an end that will be beneficial to society. Due to the structure of human society where “the values held by different groups and the goals that their members pursue often reflect a mixture of common and opposed interests” (Giddens, 2006: 109), conflict becomes a fundamental, institutionalized process which is linked to social structure, social change, and social welfare.

A Yoruba proverb that underpins the inevitability of conflict says, “A kì í mò ón gún mò ón tè, kí iyán ewùrà má lémo” (No matter how carefully we pound water yam, a few lumps will remain). The import of this proverb cannot be well appreciated until we pay attention to the sentence form and the imagery in it. The proverb has the “kì í...kí” (do/does not) simple sentence type. This sentence type, according to Olatunji (1984: 178), is called “the negative habitual tense marker.” In the present sense in which it is employed, it rules out the possibility of perfectly carrying out an endeavor no matter how hard one tries. The effectiveness of this sentence form is further tied to the image contained in the proverb. The imagery here is of food and nutrition, as reference is made to the species of the yam, *Discorea alata*, which ineluctably conditions what the by-product will be, despite the painstaking effort to prepare it without any lumps. By extension, therefore, the hallmark of human society is the presence of conflict, as social structure dictates that people must clash over interests and values.

A major precipitating factor for conflict is what I call “compulsive social proximity.” This is seen in a Yoruba proverb explaining, “Eni tí a sùn tì, ní à n jarunpá lù” (One rolls only towards the person lying beside one in bed). The image in this proverb is instructive because when two people sleep in the same bed and one of them rolls in the direction of the other, some slight to severe discomfort may be caused. In some cases, one person may have to bear the weight of some part of the straying person’s body. The discomfort caused may even reach the extreme situation of the suffocation of the bearer of the weight. If this analogy can be applied to the larger society, it may follow that people who inhabit the same geographical space cannot but infringe on one another’s rights. The sense expressed here is put differently in another proverb, which says, “Bí ilé kò bá kan ilé, kì í jó àjóràn” (If houses are not adjacent, they cannot catch fire in a row). Fire is by nature destructive and, therefore, undesirable. Since the factor of proximity must be factored into the impact of the destruction possible by a fire, its spread cannot be prevented once a house nearby is ignited. In human society too, proximity cannot but breed concomitant clashes of interests. Apart from the image of fire used here, the sentence form of the proverb deserves attention. The proverb has the “bí” clause which is equivalent to the English “if-clause.” Thus, the conditional clause introduced by the subordinator “bí” (if) expresses the fact that certain things must happen so long as there are necessary as well as sufficient conditions for them.

Apart from the above proverbs that are heavily loaded with images, there are some proverbs that have direct reference to human relations and are, therefore, self-explanatory. The first one goes, “A kì í rí arémájà, a kì í sìn rí ajámáré” (There are no permanent friends, and neither are there permanent enemies), while the second says, “Sè mí n bi ó loògùn òré” (Friendship can last for a long time only if the parties to it do not keep grudges, but ask for explanation when they feel offended). The sentence form of the first proverb above needs to be carefully analyzed. The sentence contains parallel structures where some features are held constant, particularly the structural features “A kì í rí ...” (There are no...) while others, particularly the lexical items “arémájà” (permanent friends) and “ajámáré” (permanent enemies) are varied. The rhetorical import of this sentence structure was explained by Short (1996: 14): “What is interesting about parallel structures, in addition to their perceptual prominence, is that they invite the reader to search for meaning connections between the parallel structures, in particular in terms of the parts which are varied.” In relation to the question of conflict in human society, I sense that the position of this proverb is that neither the state of being permanent friends nor permanent enemies is recommended as a healthy social condition. On the whole, the relevance of both the proverbs above to understanding conflict situations is tripartite: (i) conflict is inevitable, (ii) conflict is a social process which not only has dysfunctional aspects but also functional ones which could be antidotes to social problems, and (iii) parties in conflict should be ready to embrace reconciliation. I feel that these hard truths about conflict situations have not been well appreciated in addressing conflict issues in Africa, thereby making parties in conflict situations perceive such conflicts as being absolutely destructive and have to be so treated in dealing with their perceived opponents.

Commenting on the positive functions of conflict, Gluckman (1956) cited in Nader (1972: 238) argued that conflict need not disrupt a social system. Indeed, it could contribute toward the maintenance of society. Mitchell (1980: 62) further shed light on the beneficial results of conflict: “Conflict can bring problems to the surface and force the parties involved into a search for solutions, thus enabling the social system to adjust its structure and respond to a change in its environment.” Thus, in view of the fact that conflict may fulfill positive functions for the overall social system, Worchel & Cooper (1983: 414-415) quoted Deutsch’s (1973: 9) summation of the positive roles of conflict:

It [conflict] prevents stagnation; it stimulates interest and curiosity; it is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at; it is the root of personal and social change ... In addition, conflict demarcates groups from one another and thus helps establish group and personal identities; external conflict often fosters internal cohesiveness.

## 2. Proverbs on the Causative Agents of Violent Conflicts



Although it is established in the conflict literature that conflicts arise when parties have mutually exclusive and/or mutually incompatible and opposed values, there could be some other agents or variables that are inextricably bound up with the conflict situation and so cause it to degenerate. One major causative agent is faulty communication between the parties involved in a conflict. Ruben (1978: 202-203) was of the opinion that the most pervasive view of the conflict-communication relationship is that conflict is the direct result of faulty communication – a misunderstanding or a disagreement. In view of this, the presence of conflict is often presumed to be a consequence or at least evidence of a stoppage, breakdown, error or deterioration in communication. It is evident, therefore, that communication is inextricably bound with conflict. There is a Yoruba proverb that says, “Àgbóigbótán Ègùn tí í dá ijà sílè” (Half knowledge of Ègùn language causes quarrel between two persons). This implies that when parties in a conflict are unable to clarify issues due to faulty communication, the conflict is intensified. Lack of proficiency in Ègùn language that literally causes quarrel between two persons thus becomes a metaphor for faulty communication that possibly exacerbates conflict situations.

The ambivalent nature of communication must, however, be emphasized, as a careful handling of communication could be instrumental to the resolution of conflict. This is why a Yoruba proverb says, “Òrò gbèrè ní í yo obì lápò, òrò lile ní í yo òfà lápó” (Complimentary words bring a kola nut from the pocket, provocative words bring an arrow from the quiver). The import of this proverb for understanding conflict situations is better understood when we pay attention to its parallel structures and the tropes in it. First, note the constant structural features “... words bring ... from the ...” and the varied lexical features: the antonymous adjectives (complimentary and provocative), on the one hand, and the two categories of nouns (kola nut and arrow; pocket and quiver), on the other. In particular, the pun in the use of “àpò” (pocket) and “apó” (quiver) is of rhetorical significance. Although they sound alike, what they normally contain have the connotations of the desirable and the undesirable, respectively. What comes out of the pocket is a kola nut (that which is edible and could be shared with a loved one), but what comes out of the quiver is an arrow (that which hurts, can kill and is normally aimed at an enemy). The different contents of the different objects are in themselves metaphors. This proverb thus sounds a note of warning that communication could have beneficial or destructive effects on the conflict situation, depending on how it is handled. The relevance of the message is underlined in the antithetical structure of the sentence where the first clause states the positive effect while the second states the negative.

Another causative agent of violent conflict is (partial) third party mediation in conflict situations. Acknowledging the positive role of the third party in conflict resolution, a Yoruba proverb says, “Àísí eníketa ní eni méjì fì n ja àjàkú akátá” (It is when nobody else is near that two people fight to death). The value of this proverb for the resolution of conflict derives from the premium placed on good neighborliness in Africa, as neighbors are not supposed to simply fold their arms while certain things go wrong in their neighborhood. If the



third party would wade in promptly, conflict should not degenerate to a violent situation. In this regard, the only condition for violent conflicts to break out and persist (in Africa) is for the third party to be non-existent, which is a very remote possibility. However, the role of the third party in this situation is unpredictable. Kriesberg (1996: 125) argued:

... parties not initially involved in a conflict affect its course of development by joining in to advance their own interests or by setting limits to the conflict. Intermediaries can also mitigate the undesired aspects of conflicts by mediation, thus facilitating communication and providing face-saving options.

Relative to the negative effect of third party mediation, a Yoruba proverb says, “*Ó tó eniketa ní í dákún ijà*” (It is the third person intervention that fuels the conflict). This proverb has a vital message for parties in conflict in Africa to be wary of the role of third-party international organizations and agencies who in effect let conflict situations fester so that they can protect their own political or economic interests. This is why Adeleke (2004: 188) cautioned:

People involved in conflict should be wary of third party influences – including supposed allies, mediators and suppliers of firearms. Often third party mediators have ulterior motives when offering their assistance. In addition to economic gains, allies that are at peace are often eager to offer military assistance to other warring parties in pursuit of self-interests that are not consonant with conflict resolution.

In fact, at critical moments, the self-serving third party suffers nothing by remaining aloof. A Yoruba proverb says, “*Adájàsílè ta kété*” (One who initiates a quarrel pretends as if they know nothing about it and so keep off). The resultant aloofness of the third party is further captured in the picturesque account of another Yoruba proverb, “*Àdàbà kò náání à-n-kùn-gbé, iná n jó eye n lo ni*” (Fire in the field does not distress the dove, no sooner does she see the spreading flames than she flies away for safety.). There are dominant images in this proverb. The burning field is a metaphor for conflict area(s) where the parties are left to battle each other to ruins while the dove flying for safety from the scene is a metaphor for the third party, who cannot and will not stand the heat but must escape, leaving the parties to bear the brunt.

### 3. Proverbs on the Imperative of Managing Conflict

Conflict situations have to be managed before they degenerate to the point where they cause social instability. Throwing light on the social atmosphere when conflict lingers, a Yoruba proverb says, “*Adie bà lókùn, ara kò rokùn, ara kò ro adie*” (The fowl perches on a rope, the rope is unsteady and the fowl

feels uneasy). The repetition of the words “fowl” and “rope” is rhetorically compelling, as they stand out as the most important elements in the proverb. The psychological effect produced here is technically known as “foregrounding” where certain linguistic items are made to stand out, thereby easily catching the attention of the reader/hearer. The images of the unsteadiness of the rope on which the fowl perches and the uneasy feeling of the perching fowl depict the state of social instability in which both parties in a conflict have a price to pay. The imagery of the fowl perched atop a clothes line full of clothes hung to dry is a familiar one in a village setting. If the fowl does not immediately take off from the rope, the rope may give way, and the fowl crashes along with it or scampers for safety. To prevent the rope from giving way, the fowl has only to fly off to enjoy a rest elsewhere, and its flying away restores the rope to its original balance. This would be a conflict resolution strategy where one of the parties in conflict gives in to give peace a chance.

There are other proverbs that emphasize the fact that conflict, though a fundamental social process, needs to be nipped in the bud lest it should snowball into civil strife or full blown war. A Yoruba proverb cautions, “Bí a bá n jà, bí i ti ká kú kó” (The fact that we are quarreling does not mean that we want the opponent to die). The lesson of this proverb for warring parties in Africa is instructive. The trend of conflicts in Africa gives the picture of wanton destruction of lives and property. As such, the objective of conflict appears to be the extermination of the other party and obliteration of all that they stand for. This proverb has a great lesson for parties in conflict in Africa where genocide has been the order of the day. Another Yoruba proverb says, “Àisàn làá wò, a kì í wo ikú” (It is sickness that can be cured, as we cannot cure death). The sickness-death metaphor in this proverb emphasizes the need for timely interventions in conflict situations. In case there is any procrastination, the result may be irreversible. The wisdom of the proverb lies in the fact that sickness/disease can be cured or remedied or managed but death is final, absolute and irreversible. This truth is reinforced with the adoption of the linguistic device “kì í” (cannot) which I earlier on identified as “negative habitual tense marker.” Consequently, conflicts in Africa have to be nipped in the bud before they destroy the fabric of the society.

The tendency to procrastinate in dealing with conflict situations in Africa could be likened to the mistake of going to sleep with the roof on fire. This view finds expression in a Yoruba proverb, “A kì í finá sóri òrùlé sùn” (One dare not go to bed with the roof on fire). The image of going to sleep under such circumstances connotes risk taking, for the fire on the roof will consume the house and its occupants. This imagery conjures the scenes in war areas in Africa today where people have figuratively gone to sleep and the conflict now consumes the environments (cities, towns and communities) and they themselves are consumed, and those not consumed by the fire of the conflict become refugees in other locations. Once again, the “negative habitual tense marker” is used to underscore the hazardous nature of the action, hence the necessity for prohibiting it in human society.

#### 4. Proverbs on Probing Strategies in Conflict Resolution

The complexities characteristic of conflict situations could always make the task of resolving them most daunting. Discerning what, where, how and why something has gone wrong in social interactions would determine the success or failure of the conciliatory mission of the mediator. The mediator who is faced with the seemingly confounding evidence of the parties in conflict should be discreet enough to study the minute details of the evidence to have a clear picture of the conflict situation. To this end, a Yoruba proverb says, “Eni bá rora pa èèrà, a rí ifun inu rè” (One who kills an ant carefully may discover its intestines). The image of the ant used in this proverb is thought-provoking. Ants are, after all, quite small. This proverb contends that a task that may seem impossible could be accomplished if clinically approached. The eventual discovery of the intestines of the ant here is a metaphor for getting to the roots of conflict situations that may seem to defy investigations in the first instance.

When eventually the facts start emerging, there could be complex revelations and the mediator may not know which element to handle first before others are dealt with. In this regard, a Yoruba proverb offers some wisdom, “Bí igi bá wó lu igi, tòkè là á kó gbé kúrò” (If trees fall on trees, the topmost has to be removed first). Thus, in resolving conflict situations in Africa, it behooves the mediator to focus on the most pressing issue, which, if solved, will prepare the ground for tackling other underlying issues. In this sense, the image of the topmost tree being removed first is a strategy of finding convenient and logical points of tackling knotty issues in a conflict situation.

It is also interesting that the conciliatory process need not have attendant confrontations, as resolutions reached will be based on clear evidence from either party in conflict. Parties in conflict are not to come up with subjective opinions that will cause unnecessary argument when there could be empirically verifiable ways of proving the falsity or truthfulness of the matter(s). To buttress this point, a Yoruba proverb says, “A kì í gbódò jiyàn bóyá ose hó tàbí kò hó” (One does not argue at the side of the stream whether soap lathers or not). In this case, the images of soap and water as reagents are compelling, since an attempt to validate the worth of the former is made practical with the availability of the latter. Once again, a negative statement is used in this proverb to rule out the possibility of engaging in unnecessary arguments since the occasion does not warrant it. This proverb emphasizes the place of proofs beyond further challenge in the process of arriving at resolutions. It is not only the parties that should just provide proofs; the mediator too should be transparent enough to base their resolutions on such proofs. This is because more often than not, the process of reaching resolutions is manipulated by the privileged high power groups in conflict to favor their own party. Apparently, when resolutions are tilted towards favoring the dominant group, the conflict situation is further aggravated. This proverb, therefore, offers the lesson of basing judgments on clear evidence and not on the whims and caprices of those who hold sway in society to the detriment of the unprivileged class.

## 5. Proverbs on Dispositions Necessary for Realistic Conflict Resolution

There are certain attitudes that parties in a conflict have to accept so that the task of resolving conflict will be worthwhile after all. It is noteworthy that some Yoruba proverbs condemn negative attitudes towards resolving conflict, and some celebrate the virtues that will engender peaceful resolutions of conflict.

Because there is no way of reading people's hearts, parties in conflict may pretend to have overlooked their grievances, only for them to resort to violent clashes thereafter. It is in this light that a Yoruba proverb exhorts, "A kí í fẹ̀jẹ̀ dúdú sínú tutó funfun sítà" (One ought not to have black blood within and then spit out white). This proverb argues for the need for thoughts to be matched by corresponding actions. The semiotic force of the choice of colors in this proverb is intriguing. There is a case of transferred epithet in the use of the color black as a qualifying element for blood. Biologically, the color of blood is red, but here the use of black to qualify blood is semiotically significant. Within the Yoruba world view, black connotes evil and white connotes purity or peace. This proverb condemns the incongruity between what these colors signify, as parties in conflict may assume divergent dispositions.

With regard to the virtues necessary for resolving conflict, I consider here two Yoruba proverbs that touch on the spirits of large-heartedness and "forgive and forget." The first virtue is expressed in the proverb, "Bí a bá fí owó òtún bá omo wí, à sì tún fí owó òsì fà á móra" (If we chastise a child with the right hand, we should draw them near ourselves with the left). The use of the if-clause in this proverb is instructive. It typifies the use of conditional statements in the rhetorical discourse of conflict resolution. This sentence form, we must note, is commonly used to create a rhetorical effect in Yoruba proverbial discourse by balancing two arguments in seemingly contrasting situations. Olatunji (1984: 176), commenting on the rhetorical significance of this sentence form in Yoruba proverbial discourse, said, "Some statements ... outline the conditions for certain types of behavior or reaction. The idea is to define situations and to state what should or should not be done in such situations." With reference to the proverb in question, it is possible for a party to have clearly wronged the other, but the aggrieved party should not consider that to be the end of peaceful co-existence. They should be large-hearted enough to try to overlook the misdeeds in a bid to ensure the continuous harmonious interpersonal relationship. In particular, the roles and statuses of the participants in conflict situations come into play. In the above proverb, the unequal parent-child role/status relationship is presented as an antidote to the peaceful resolution of the conflict. I assume that the more experienced, exposed, knowledgeable and socialized one party is, the easier it becomes for them to condone the essences of the other trouble-making party. A compromise in the conflict situation could be reached when either of the parties with a more respectable social role or status demonstrates greater understanding.

The other proverb which touches on the spirit of "forgive and forget" also

admits the gravity of the wrong the other party may have done, but argues that an attempt to retaliate will cause no little harm, hence it says, “Bí a bá rò didùn ifòn, a ó hora dé eegun” (If one considers the irritation of an itch, nothing will restrain one from scratching to the bone). This proverb preaches a high level of tolerance arguably reinforced with the image of reacting to the sensation of an itch to the point of being tempted to scratch to the bone. Scratching to the bone then becomes a metaphor for seeking revenge in a conflict situation to the point of threatening social fabric.

Consideration for others is another virtue worth paying attention to. This virtue is particularly relevant to conflicts in Africa that bear upon the allocation and sharing of resources, on the one hand, and access to power, on the other. A proverb says, “Enikan kì í je, kí ilú fẹ̀” (The prosperity of a single person does not make a town larger). This proverb de-emphasizes the act of satisfying selfish interests in the community where the resources should go round. It follows that the spirit of give and take is a necessary condition for peaceful coexistence. The moment the emphasis is on the individual and the desperate bid to take all without any sharing with others, conflicts will continue to escalate in African communities. The situation even worsens when certain dominant groups, whether due to sheer wanton trouble-making or otherwise, seize control of the resources of subordinate groups, resulting in the latter challenging the former in a most violent manner. In such a situation where a conflict arises when what belongs to one is unlawfully taken over by another, resolving the conflict hinges on the kind of wisdom expressed in a Yoruba proverb which says, “Bí eye kò bá fin eye níràn, ojù òrun tó eye fò láifara kanra” (If birds do not seek a cause of quarrel, the sky is wide enough for them to fly in without touching one another). The imagery of the sky here is interesting, for it is such a wide space that birds can freely fly about. As such, in the physical environment inhabited by humans, there are clear boundaries where the individual rights and obligations should not be willfully infringed upon unnecessarily.

Finally, of particular importance to realistic conflict resolution in Africa is the need for the parties in conflict to honor agreements reached at the arbitration panel. Quite often, after an accord has been reached, one or both parties renege on their promises, thereby resulting in further conflicts. An African value which has been downplayed here is the ability to honor one’s words. A Yoruba proverb exhorts, “Bí ojù bá yejú, kí ohùn má yẹ̀” (If there is no more face-to-face contact, let not the original agreement fail). Thus, faithfulness to jointly reached agreements is instrumental to resolving conflicts, as distance should not be an excuse for breaking promises.

### III. THE SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed and discussed the linguistic-cum-rhetorical devices in Yoruba proverbial discourse on conflict resolution by juxtaposing the communicative goals of the discourse with the strategies that are used to achieve them.

First, I have pointed out that when recommending what should be done towards resolving conflict, positive statements are deployed in Yoruba proverbs. This is in contrast to when people are warned against taking certain negative actions in conflict situations.

It is noteworthy that most of the proverbs revolving around the imperative of managing conflicts, and those emphasizing the necessary dispositions for conflict resolution, fall under the deliberative kind of speech in Aristotle's rhetorical model. In this rhetorical model, the speaker either advises the audience to do something or warns against doing something. Under this situation, the audience will have to judge the things that may happen in the future and decide whether they are good or bad, advantageous or harmful. That is why the proverbs I have discussed in the preceding sections all use rhetoric pointing out that certain negative attitudes harmful to conflict resolution should be shunned while the positive ones that would engender peaceful conflict resolution should be accepted.

I have also drawn attention to the use of pun, parallelism, and antithesis in the Yoruba proverbs as devices that are used to foreground issues of paramount importance. At another level, I have identified the preponderance of imagery as a veritable rhetorical tool. The use of images in the discourse is expedient, since proverbs contain traditional observations that serve to guide humans in their day-to-day activities. Olatunji (1984: 174) explained, "There is imagery in the proverbs but this can only be appreciated when they are related to particular situations." It is in this light that the pragmatic force of the images in the proverbs comes to the fore in relation to conflict situations and conflict resolution strategies.

In conclusion, I emphasize that the proverbs I have analyzed and discussed in this paper a holistic approach to managing and/or resolving conflict situations in Africa. There is, first, a vast repository of Yoruba proverbs that corroborated the views of social thinkers in the conflict literature that conflict is a fundamental and institutionalized social process linked to social structure, social change, and social welfare. They suggest the fact that there are conflicts in Africa, therefore, is not an aberrant situation, for conflict is inevitable in human interactions. Beyond this category of proverbs, there are other proverbs that explicitly posit that when conflict situations arise, they need to be well managed to forestall the destructive degeneration into a war situation. Given that proverbs are generally prescriptive in nature, some proverbs center on the rule of conduct for handling conflict situations. In this regard, proverbs which suggest modes by which social conflicts can be peacefully resolved without prejudice should be utilized by interested parties. All in all, I argue that although proverbs are not the exclusive preserve of any race or nation, the rhetorical import of the Yoruba proverbs I have thrown light on in this study is germane to attaining realistic conflict resolution in Africa, because the wisdom of such proverbs transcends cultural boundaries.



## REFERENCES

- Adeleke, D.A. 2004. Lessons from Yoruba mythology. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 39(3): 179-191.
- Agbaje, J.B. 2005. The place of Yoruba proverbs in the understanding of Yoruba philosophy and education. *International Journal of African and African American Studies*, 1(5): 48-54.
- Brock-Utne, B. 2001. *Indigenous Conflict Resolution in Africa*. A draft presented to the week-end seminar on indigenous solutions to conflicts held at the University of Oslo, Institute of Educational Research February 23-24, 2001. pp. 1-16. online. <http://www.africavenir.com/publications/occasional-papers/BrockUtneTradConflictResolution.pdf> (Accessed January 25, 2008).
- Chilton, P. 1988. *Orwellian Language and the Media*. Pluto, London.
- Deutsch, M. 1973. *The Resolution of Conflict*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn.
- Draman, R. 2003. *Poverty and Conflict in Africa: Explaining a Complex Relationship*. Draft prepared for: Experts Group Meeting on Africa-Canada Parliamentary Strengthening Program Addis Ababa, May 19-23, 2003 pp. 1-18. online. [http://www.parlcent.ca/povertyreduction/seminar1\\_e.pdf](http://www.parlcent.ca/povertyreduction/seminar1_e.pdf) (Accessed March 10, 2008).
- Giddens, A. 2006. *Sociology*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Gluckman, M. 1956. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Free Press, Glenco.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & R. Hasan 1985. *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-semiotic Perspective*. Deakin University, Victoria.
- Hussein, J.W. 2005. The social and ethno-cultural construction of masculinity and femininity in African proverbs. *African Study Monographs*, 26(2): 59-87.
- Kriesberg, L. 1996. Conflict, social. In (A. Kuper & J. Kuper, eds.) *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, pp. 122-125. Routledge, London.
- Machel, G. 2004. *Mitigating, Preventing and Ending Conflicts in Africa: The Link between Conflict, Refugees and Food Security*. Summary Note: Assuring Food and Nutrition Security in Africa by 2020; Prioritizing Action: Strengthening Actors, and Facilitating Partnerships. April 1-3, 2004 Kampala, Uganda. pp. 1-6. online. <http://www.ifpri.org/2020africaconference/program/day1summaries/machel.pdf> (Accessed February 20, 2008).
- Marshall, M.G. 2005. *Conflict Trends in Africa, 1946-2004: A Macro-Comparative Perspective*. Report prepared for the Africa Conflict Prevention Poll (ACPP), Government of the United Kingdom October 14, 2005. pp. 1-28. online. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/africa/AfricaConflictTrendsMGM2005us.pdf> (Accessed November 25, 2008).
- McQuarrie, E.F. & D.G. Mick 1996. *Figures of Rhetoric in Advertising Language*. online. <http://lsb.scu.edu/~emcquarrie/rhetjcr.htm> (Accessed March 16, 2008).
- Mitchell, C.R. 1980. Evaluating conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*, XVII(1): 61-75.
- Monye, A.A. 1990. On why people use proverbs. *Africana Marburgensia*, xxiii: 3-11.
- Nader, L. 1972. Conflict: Anthropological aspects. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 3&4: 236-241.
- Ofuho, C.H. 1999. Community conflict resolution and reconciliation in the Kidepo Valley of Eastern Equatoria, South Sudan: Some lessons from grassroot practices of peacemaking. Paper presented to the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, November 8th-12th 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Oha, O. 1998. The semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs. *African Study Monographs*, 19(2): 87-102.
- Olatunji, O.O. 1984. *Features of Yoruba Poetry*. University Press Limited, Ibadan.



- Osaghae, E. 2000. Applying traditional methods to modern conflict: Possibilities and limits. In (I. W. Zartman, ed.) *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts*, pp. 201-218. Lynne Rienner Publisher Inc., Boulder, CO.
- Osaghae, E. & G. Robinson 2005. Introduction. In (E. Porter, G. Robinson, M. Smyth, A. Schnabel & E. Osaghae, eds.) *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*, pp. 1-5. online.  
<http://www.unu.edu/unupress/sample-chapters/ResearchingConflictAfrica.pdf> (Accessed March 22, 2008).
- Renkema, J. 2004. *Introduction to Discourse Studies*. John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam.
- Ruben, B.D. 1978. Communication and conflict: A System-theoretic perspective. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64(2): 202-210.
- Short, M. 1996. *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. Longman, London.
- Ssetuba, I. 2002. *The hold of patriarchy: An appraisal of the Ganda proverb in the light of modern gender relations*. A Paper for Cairo Gender Symposium, April 7-10, 2002. Cairo.
- United States Institute of Peace, 2001. 15 October 2001 special report no 75, Aids and violent conflict in Africa: Special reports. online.  
<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr75.html#vector> (Accessed March 17, 2008).
- Worchel, S. & J. Cooper 1983. *Understanding Social Psychology*. The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois.
- Zartman, I.W. 2000. Introduction: African traditional conflict "medicine." In (I.W. Zartman, ed.) *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts*, pp. 1-11. Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO.

————— Accepted December 25, 2008

Author's Name and Address: Adeyemi ADEGOJU, *Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, NIGERIA.*  
 E-mail: yemiadegoju@oauife.edu.ng

